Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 24

Introduced by Senator Kuehl

February 22, 2005

Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 24—Relative to wildfire protection.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SCR 24, as introduced, Kuehl. Wildfire protection.

This measure would, in light of the annual losses in the state of life, property, and natural resources resulting from wildland fire, urge the federal government to provide federal financial assistance to be used to predict wildfire behavior. The measure would also request that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) undertake the development of a National Fire Weather Center, which would allocate resources to provide rapid and accurate meteorological information that is useful for predicting the movement of wildfire perimeters, guiding evacuations, and enabling government officials to make informed decisions about how to most effectively attack a wildfire and deploy resources.

Fiscal committee: no.

WHEREAS, Southern California experienced devastating wildfires in the fall of 2003 that consumed nearly 750,000 acres, destroyed nearly 3,700 dwellings, and resulted in the tragic deaths of 24 persons. Property losses in excess of $2 billion dollars made the fires the most costly natural disaster in the state's history. Compounding the damage caused by wildfire were the mudslides that took human life, caused significant property damage, and polluted rivers and reservoirs with tons of sediment and other material. The fires reinforced the importance, for

public safety, of adequate early warning of the approach of fire, and the need for evacuation, especially in remote areas; and

WHEREAS, California has the highest population in the United States that is situated in fire-prone wildland and urban-interface areas, of which 31 million acres are located in southern California. Large numbers of isolated communities, many of which have limited firefighting capability, remain particularly at risk; and

WHEREAS, Numerous well-known factors contributed to the devastating loss of life and property. Particularly in the autumn, dry winds, blowing coastward from the desert, and accelerating through narrow passes in the southern California mountain ranges, undergo compressional heating. Furthermore, a seven-year drought has caused the chaparral and forested areas to become tinder-dry. Drought-stressed pine trees have succumbed to bark-beetle infestation. Only 7 percent of the dead trees were burned in 2003, so these remain a major fire hazard in several southern California counties. Ignitions, whether initiated by arson, accident, or act of nature could result in a complex of large-area fires, which could spread across the typically hilly terrain, at a catastrophically rapid rate; and

WHEREAS, The rains of 2004 and early 2005, if sustained over time, may relieve drought conditions, even as they will certainly regenerate the very types of vegetation that burned in the 2003 fires. Accordingly, the fire season that ravaged southern California in 2003 should be viewed as cyclical, and part of the natural system. However, whereas major fires occurred once in a score of years during the early and mid 20th century, they now are experienced much more frequently. Thus, unlike other natural disasters, a return of investment in wildfire-loss mitigation is anticipated to be realized frequently, even annually; and

WHEREAS, To help deploy resources to fight wildland fires, a key decision is how optimally to deploy manpower, ground equipment, and aerial resources. This decision centers on anticipating where the fire perimeter will be at specific times in the future based on its condition, size, and predicted rate of advance. The local rate of firefront advance depends on the local topography, which changes very slowly the local vegetation, which changes, mainly seasonally, and the local meteorology, which changes often in minutes. The expanded use of

remote-sensing technologies, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's) with infrared-imaging capability, in conjunction with the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) that can identify the current firefront position has already been recommended by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission. It is also critical to focus on the meteorological parameters that affect the deployment of resources, because these are the factors that change the most rapidly; now therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate of the State of California, the Assembly thereof concurring, That, in light of the annual losses in the state of life, property, and natural resources resulting from wildland fire, the California Legislature urges the federal government to provide California with federal financial assistance to be used to predict wildfire behavior. This assistance should entail the development of frequently updated, high-spatial-resolution weather forecasting during periods when disastrous large-scale fires are imminent or already burning, and would provide benefits not only to California, but to the many other states with significant risk from wildland fire; and be it further

Resolved, That the California Legislature respectfully requests that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) undertake the development of a National Fire Weather Center, which would allocate resources to provide rapid and accurate meteorological information that is useful for predicting the movement of wildfire perimeters, guiding evacuations, and enabling government officials to make informed decisions about how to most effectively attack a wildfire and deploy resources. The California Legislature strongly believes that this federal investment, in conjunction with the steps underway at the state level, is a wise allocation of resources that will provide multiple long-term benefits in the future; and be it further

Resolved, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the author for appropriate distribution.

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